

YOU'VE HEARD STORIES ABOUT THE LEGENDARY FOX THEATRE,
BUT **EDWARD ARMSTRONG** AND **JOE PATTEN**
CAN REVEAL THE SECRETS YOU NEVER KNEW

OF THE FOX

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD T. BRYANT

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JOE PATTEN

The greatest secret of The Fox is how one man's love affair with Atlanta's most beloved theater saved it. Twice.

BY SCOTT FREEMAN

THE PHANTOM OF THE FOX SMILES AND SAYS, "FOLLOW ME."

He is white-haired and slightly hunched over from age and spinal fusion surgery, but I have to hustle to keep up with him as he leads me through the twists and turns of the hallways inside The Fox Theatre. After a while, he goes through a door and then up a stairwell and then down another hallway until we reach a large room. He walks to the corner and reaches for a door so slim that it might lead to a broom closet. He opens it, turns back and invites me in with a sweep of his hand. "This is where I live," he says.

The Phantom is perhaps the greatest mystery of The Fox. No one ever seems to see him; all we know is that he is this beloved but mythical figure said to exist in some lair deep inside the theater. Or maybe he doesn't . . . you could

Patten in the
"organ pipe" room
at The Fox.



JONATHAN HOLLADA



never know for sure. And yet, one phone call and here I am with the Phantom, Joe Patten, a 75-year-old man who still strides with a happy gait as he guides me into the apartment that is surely the most enviable address in Atlanta.

THE ARCHITECTURE, OF COURSE, IS MOORISH. As are the tapestries on the walls. It has the same huge faux stone walls as inside the theater, the same floors. There are two floors, and the upstairs has two sunken bedrooms and a raised den. Downstairs are the living room, dining room and a spacious kitchen that is artfully decorated with a row of tile that circles the room. Against one wall is his wine rack: one of those old, black store safes. We settle in a living room furnished with elegant antiques and sit down on a couple of cushioned, dark wood chairs. Behind the Phantom is a working grand player piano; he has several dozen original scrolls in a nearby closet. Facing him in the opposite corner is a Hammond church organ.

Some men fall in love with a beautiful woman; the Phantom of The Fox fell in love with a beautiful old building. Patten still recalls with perfect clarity the day he first beheld

"Mighty Mo" was virtually unplayable when Patten (above) refurbished it in 1963. The organ's 3,622 pipes extend through several different rooms and areas of the theater. A few of them (opposite) are engraved by the craftsmen who made them with information that includes the temperature in which it holds perfect pitch. This one says: "Möller ... organ #5566 ... 15" wind ... A-440 at 70° F ... 8/16/29 ... W.F. Capaldi."



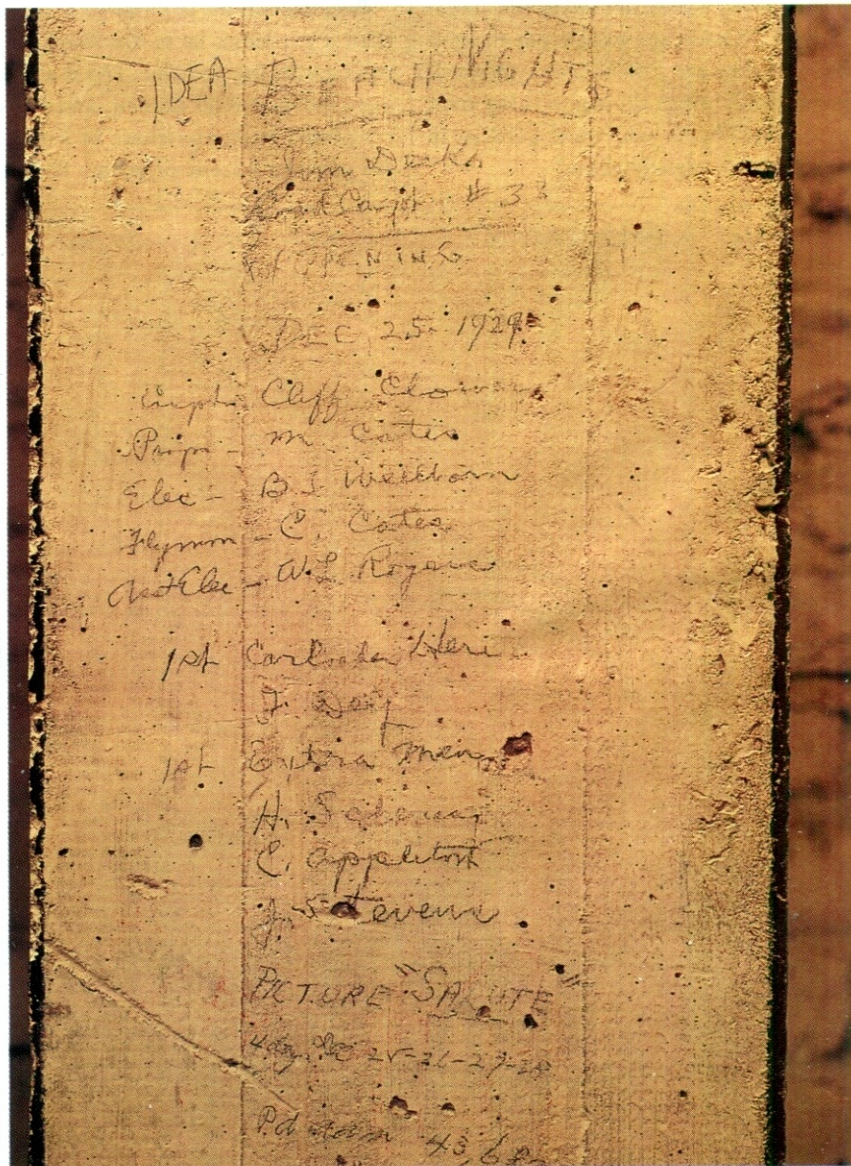
the theater in 1947 when he came to Atlanta from Florida to visit friends. "It was a Sunday afternoon," he says. "It was the Fourth of July and there was a free concert at The Fox, the Atlanta Pops Orchestra. We sat in the balcony, but we could see the blue sky and the twinkling stars and the moving clouds. It was an experience I couldn't believe." He pauses, as if to savor the sweetness of the memory, then smiles. "And afterward, of course, we all went to The Varsity."

BY 1963, PATTEN HAD MOVED to Atlanta to install and repair X-ray equipment. He also had a hobby/part-time job: He restored and repaired organs. Patten met Bob Van Camp, WSB Radio's program director and an organist who had once played "Mighty Mo," the 3,622-pipe Möller Deluxe theater organ inside The Fox. It was the second largest theater organ in the world, and it had been allowed to fall apart. "It was not really playing," says Patten. "It made grunts and groans, but that was all." Patten and Van Camp approached the theater owners and offered to renovate the instrument. It was a 10-month project that turned into a lifetime. Patten arrived, and he never really left.

It is almost impossible today to imagine the squalid condition of The Fox when Patten began work to restore Mighty Mo. The theater was owned by a movie chain and its glory days were far behind it. Built in 1929 by the Shriners for their national headquarters, The Fox Theatre was spectacularly grand and bold and ornate. The interior was an indoor Arabian courtyard complete with flickering stars and clouds, a faux canopy hanging over the balcony. It even included hidden air conditioning and heating ducts. The Shriners spared no cost and, as a result, ran out of money during construction and had to partner with movie mogul William Fox in order to finish the building. The Fox Theatre opened just in time for the Depression, and went bankrupt after only 125 weeks of operation. The theater began to prosper in the '40s as the grandest movie palace in



Among the many hidden areas that Patten discovered is a walkway (left) high above the stage complete with street lights, and the space above the planetarium (above). On the wall by the stage (below), the backstage crew scrawled their names on a wall during The Fox's opening night in 1929.



PHANTOMS OF THE FOX

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the South. Then came the Age of Neglect and the theater began to decay into a dying artifact.

Patten became the caretaker of the organ, and he would soon become caretaker of the theater itself. He finagled his own key, which allowed him to come and go as he pleased. He was fascinated by all the hidden passages throughout The Fox, how you could disappear on *this* side of the building and then mysteriously reappear somewhere on *that* side. He learned them all, every nook and every cranny. And he learned everything he could about the building. He befriended the people who worked there. One person taught him how to work the ballasts that raise and lower the stage curtains. Another how to run the ancient air conditioning system and then the heating plant. Patten even learned how to change the light bulbs in the planetarium. "I just *knew*," he said. "I kept thinking: One of these days, all of this is going to be my responsibility."

Those days arrived in the early '70s.

By then, the majestic old theater was worn and tired, reduced to surviving on second-run flicks. Patten stopped by The Fox one afternoon to find a pickup truck backed up to a door. The truck's owners were inside, scavenging the theater for antique furniture. Patten chased them away, and then he gathered together a group of his friends. They promptly took every bit of movable furniture in The Fox—every lamp, couch and chair—and stashed it all in the building's subterranean basement rooms. "I don't know whether I had the only keys to those rooms," he says with a twinkle. "But I think I may have."

The incident foreshadowed the darkest day in the history of the theater. One afternoon in 1974, Patten was approached by a friend who was a lawyer in one of Atlanta's biggest firms who relayed a conversation he'd overheard at The Commerce Club: Southern Bell was about to purchase The Fox, and within eight hours of signing the contract, they would implode the building. "It was like being hit in the face with a steel whip," says Patten. "I had no idea. Nobody did. I

knew something had to be done."

Patten quickly spearheaded the formation of a non-profit group called Atlanta Landmarks to rescue the theater from destruction. Thousands of Atlantans, bound by a collective love for the theater, rallied around the battle cry of "Save The Fox" in a way that the city had seldom united before or since. For Southern Bell, now BellSouth, the plan to tear down The Fox became a public relations nightmare that lingers even to this day. A huge number of customers protested by scrawling "Save The Fox" every month on their phone bills. Donations to the cause poured in. Southern Bell finally gave in to the pressure and sold the building to Atlanta Landmarks in June 1975. Joe Patten was able to go downstairs to the basement rooms and unlock the doors and return the furniture to its rightful place upstairs. The Fox Theatre was about to be reborn.

Patten became the theater's technical director, and when he decided to sell his home in College Park and move intown, he was offered a deal—why not move into the theater itself? They needed some-

one on the premises on a 24-hour basis, someone who knew the ins and outs of the building and could trouble-shoot emergencies. Would he be interested? Yes, he would. Did he know of any space that would be conducive for living quarters? Indeed, he did. For years Patten had eyed the old Shriners office suite underneath the domes on the North Avenue side of the building. He knew it was the apartment of his dreams. He took it, paid to have the space renovated into living quarters and was given a lifetime lease.

The move paid off in 1996 when Patten was awakened early one morning by an alarm. Out the window of his apartment, he could see smoke rising from the ceiling of a restaurant in The Fox building; an electrical fire was smoldering inside that could have taken the whole building down. He alerted two policemen standing outside to pull the fire alarm and The Fox Theatre was rescued for a second time.

Though he is seldom seen, Patten's mark is all over the modern-day theatre. There is, of course, the fully functional Mighty Mo, still in operation today.

When Loew's Grand Theatre downtown—the old movie palace, where *Gone With the Wind* premiered—was destroyed by fire in 1979, Patten took 100 of the Loew's seats and placed them upstairs in the gallery section of The Fox. "I just thought that was a bit of history that ought to be retained," he says. He also purchased Loew's 70mm projector and set it up at The Fox. "*Star Wars* had never been shown in Atlanta on 70mm and six-track sound because there were no projectors in the city to do it. And after that, we booked *Indiana Jones*. It just blew people's minds. It was an experience they couldn't get anywhere else."

The biggest stage show brought to The Fox was, fittingly enough, *Phantom of the Opera*. "It's still the most elegant show we've ever done," Patten says. "It went over so well, visually and acoustically. The shows sold out. Things worked. We made money. We survived." When I remind him that people refer to him as "The Phantom of The Fox," his laugh is almost shy. "I don't really know how that happened," he

says. "It goes back a long time, I guess because of the fact I know the building so well. I could go into a door and come out on the other side and people would go, 'How did you get from here to there?' There was an illusion of walking through walls."

Later, Patten leads me through another door inside his apartment. We go down a hall and emerge in the foyer of the theater, and I can't help but pause to take in the expanse of The Fox. "Did you ever hear Bob Van Camp play?" he asks. Who didn't? Who could forget the pre-movie sing-alongs? Some of my most treasured memories happened at The Fox Theatre. I saw the best concert of my life here, Springsteen in 1978. I saw Lynyrd Skynyrd and REM and Diana Krall and the Indigo Girls perform with the Atlanta Ballet. And I am standing with the single person who made all those memories possible.

In lore, he is known as the Phantom of The Fox. But, here's the secret: There is nothing greater than a love requited. Joe Patten fell in love with The Fox Theatre. And then he saved it for all of us. ★

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